

**Coventry University Repository for the Virtual Environment
(CURVE)**

Author name: Irene Glendinning & Ian Dunn.

Title: Supporting learners through the development of a student experience enhancement unit.

Article & version: Presented version.

Original citation

Glendinning, I. and Dunn, I. (2009, April 21-22). *Supporting learners through the development of a student experience enhancement unit* Paper presented at the NACADA 3rd International Personal Tutoring and Academic Advising Conference.

Conference website:

<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/IntrntlConf/PersTutAvsg/2009UK/index.htm>

A shortened version of this paper has also been published as a journal article, see <http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open/items/1e7b9892-cd54-224b-783a-d547b7d53ae4/1/> for more details.

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Available in the CURVE Research Collection: May 2011

<http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open>

Supporting learners through the development of a Student Experience Enhancement Unit

Co-Authors: Ian Dunn and Irene Glendinning
Email: i.dunn@coventry.ac.uk, ireneg@coventry.ac.uk
Faculty of Engineering and Computing,
Coventry University,
Coventry,
England,
CV1 5FB

Abstract

This paper describes the development of a support unit within the Faculty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University that is designed to enhance the experience of students. The service is staffed by a team of Student Advocates who are trained to work with their peers and assist in the resolution of issues as diverse as academic matters, timetables, finance, accommodation, disabled student support and many others. The Student Advocate role provides a hybrid student/staff view of faculty operations, which serves well for exploring and researching aspects of university life affecting the student experience. The team collects and analyses evidence by conducting surveys and focus groups often at the request of academic staff to enhance course design and development and improve systems and services. This is the first year of operation of the service, so far take up is good and increasing and the paper will present a review of activities to date.

Ian Dunn is Associate Dean (External)
Irene Glendinning is Academic Manager for Student Experience

Key words

Student experience, student support, student advocacy, employing students, Activity Led Learning

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explain the vision that resulted in the establishment of a faculty-based student experience enhancement unit, how that unit has operated to date and the next phases of development. For the purposes of this paper student experience is used to describe the activities that support the main learning experience, from the training required to be an effective personal tutor to dealing with

the complex machinery of university administration. In many ways this can be considered to be an attempt at defining customer service for students.

The Faculty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University is a large multi-disciplinary faculty of technology spanning from Mathematics to Civil Engineering and Computer Science to Motorsport Engineering, with a significant interest in the management of technology. The Faculty comprises some 200 full-time and 70 part-time academic staff, supported by 50 administrative and 50 technical staff. The 'established' staff are assisted by an increasingly important employed student population. In terms of student numbers the Faculty is made up of about 3200 undergraduates, 900 postgraduates and 100 research students, or 3500 full-time equivalent students. More than 25% of the students studying in Coventry are international and very significantly the Faculty has a large presence in a wide number of institutions around the world offering franchised arrangements, accounting for a further 3000 students.

The Faculty was formed in 2005 by merging two smaller academic schools and one additional department and has subsequently been refining its approaches to student support and pedagogy based on excellent practice observed in universities throughout the world. The Faculty has developed an approach to learning that is being coined as Activity Led Learning, aimed at developing the professional skills of project management and communication, alongside the technical learning expected. This along with developing a modern and mature view of student experience has become a cornerstone to the direction of travel for the Faculty. This is all to be seen in the light of the University investing £60M in a new building and facilities to allow the Faculty to develop for the future.

The Faculty vision is to provide a cohesive and supportive study environment where student activities are central to the learning process. The Student Experience Enhancement Unit (SEE-u) was conceived and established during 2007-8 and started operation in October 2008 as part of this vision. The need for such a unit evolved over several years, inspired by the success of the Faculty's Debt Officer initially supporting students with financial problems, then being trusted and consulted about a much wider range of issues. This evidence led to the realisation of the need for a much wider local advocacy service, to supplement existing central services provided by the University.

The idea for the employment of students to operate this service was based on similar support structures observed in universities in the USA, particularly as observed at PACE in New York City and at Boston University. However the USA university units differed from the Coventry approach in that they were centrally managed rather than faculty-based.

Student Employment

There is a growing body of evidence (Sullivan, 2008) suggesting that employing students within the university is both a positive experience for the student but can have unexpectedly positive effects for the institution. The first is relatively obvious

and is better student retention; this has a number of reasons not least that for the student who needs to work to earn money for living costs, to work during the day, between classes, is clearly less disruptive than working in the evenings or nights in more traditional student employment. More expectedly work by the Northwest Missouri State University suggests that they are able to finance the employment of a large number of students entirely through the fee income derived through better retention. The final and perhaps best reason for the university to consider its approach to employing students is through enhanced employability skills development, so long as the employment is structured and monitored, and better motivation and institutional engagement.

It is with this in mind that the Faculty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University has been developing its response to this trend. To date the Faculty employs four categories of student, described in Table 1.

Graduate Interns	Postgraduate students for whom their tuition fee for Masters degree or Doctoral degree is funded and who receive a bursary towards living costs in return for a number of hours of classroom support. They assist academic staff by operating laboratories, workshops and as extra support in tutorials.
Student Advocates	This category of employment is described in much greater detail through this paper.
Student Assistants	Students who work within the administrative and technical support functions of the Faculty, they are paid on an hourly basis. They agree their hours with the Student Employment Officer, who has responsibility for managing the HR side of the student employment.
Student Ambassadors	This group are students who support the Faculty marketing and collaboration activities. They are used in both an in-reach and out-reach role, meaning that they are very present and very visible on Faculty Open Days but that they also do support work in local schools and colleges acting as mentors to younger students on technical programmes.

Table 1: Current job roles for student employees

The Faculty currently employs about 100 students and has plans in place to extend this to 300, including ensuring that each member of academic staff has a Graduate Intern working with them and that the first point of contact for all student queries is through a developed advocacy service.

Training and Management

The current SEE-u team consists of nine Student Advocates, but there are plans to expand the numbers and the activities significantly for the next academic year, as described later in this paper. The key to the effectiveness of the advocates is the training provided, particularly in the form of induction for their duties, but experience so far has proved that on-going personal development activities for the advocates are necessary for enhancing the capabilities of the team, but also to motivate individuals in their approaches both to advocacy duties and towards colleagues in the unit.

In addition to the advocates there are currently three non-student members of the SEE-u team: one of the co-authors of this paper, the Academic Manager for Student Experience manages the unit and advises on academic issues; an assistant registrar provides support and guidance on student records, registration and assessment issues; the Faculty Debt Officer continues in his earlier role as adviser for students with financial problems. The other co-author of this paper, the Associate Dean (external) is responsible overall for the unit and provides links to higher management within the University.

The unit has three strands of activity. In addition to the advocacy service, the team is engaged in research activities to pro-actively explore aspects of the student experience and to collect evidence of good and less good systems and processes, for example using surveys, focus groups and attending student committees. The evidence accrued from the advocacy and research activities informs the third strand, which is to actively negotiate and facilitate process improvement, to encourage the adoption of excellence in “customer” service for all student-facing systems and where possible to foster a culture of continuous improvement.

The first advocates were appointed in late September 2008, following responses to an internal notice circulated to students a few weeks earlier. A consequence of the timing was that most of the applicants and all the initial appointees were postgraduate students. However two undergraduate students and some other postgraduates were appointed later. The selection of advocates was based on a written application followed by an interview. The essential characteristics for appointment are ability to communicate well face-to-face and in writing, mature and calm approach backed by a good academic record.

Before the advocates could begin to operate effectively it was essential to provide some training and guidance. This was achieved by running some initial seminars followed by weekly team meetings at which some new skills were developed or guidance was introduced. There were also many meetings with departmental staff in the Faculty and agencies and offices around the campus. This was partly to inform all the team about supporting services that they needed to integrate with, but also to raise awareness of the unit and its purpose. There have been problems providing the same level of training for individuals who joined the team later. This issue needs to be addressed for the future.

Even with the limited student advocate team size of 9-10 during the pilot year it soon became apparent that a team-leader was needed to coordinate the team on a day-to-day basis, to maintain the working rota and to monitor attendance and absences. The team leader role has gradually evolved, but there have been some conflicts, particularly in the development stages. The full experience has influenced the arrangements for the next academic year.

Activities to date

The initial problem for the unit was to raise awareness and promote understanding to colleagues of why it was being founded and how it would operate. The publicity began in June 2008, before any advocates had been appointed, with a paper presented by the team to Coventry University's Elate Conference (Glendinning, 2008). This raised some interest across the University, which resulted in other faculties considering a similar approach. The second opportunity for dissemination was at the Faculty's away-day in July 2008, which had the theme of Enhancing the Student Experience. This event allowed the team to address all staff in the Faculty, professional services, technical support and academics, and to respond to some initial concerns. It became clear from this event that there was a certain level of scepticism about the need for such a service.

SEE-u's main *raison d'être* was to support Faculty students, therefore the service needed to be launched to the student community. This was done by providing presentations to new and returning students during induction week in September 2008. The publicity was later supplemented by posters, notices, leaflets and a web site, which were all developed by the advocate team. A side effect of the publicity was many requests from students for employment as advocates.

The demand for the advocacy service has varied significantly in size, nature and scope during the year. Initially the team was very busy dealing with bewildered new students, late arrivals, room changes and out-of-date printed timetables, in addition to advising on more serious problems. As the term progressed the number of simple queries declined, but there were many more students with complex personal issues. The advocates rapidly developed their knowledge and skills for dealing with specific requests, supported by the permanent team members. About 100 serious cases have been logged to date; these cover issues about student finance and fees, academic matters, accommodation issues, room and estates queries, student registry and disability matters. However some of these related to a complex combination of issues and many involved multiple consultations. All cases were followed up to the point of some resolution of the problem. Many simpler queries that could be resolved immediately were not logged.

The SEE-u team have pro-actively engaged in various activities to capture information about the student experience. Advocates have been involved in surveys, interviews and focus groups both initiated from the team and at the request of departmental heads. They have also attended meetings such as course consultancy committees and boards of study. The advocates have been utilised to aid retention

monitoring, including making contact with students with poor attendance records. The demand for advocates' time and skills has remained high.

SEE-u is ultimately concerned with improving the student experience. The advocacy service largely helps individuals, but provides a useful source of information about systems and services not operating well. The pro-active investigations are designed to gather information, which can be then analysed and evaluated. Drawing together all the accumulated intelligence provides the input to the important third strand of activities for the unit, namely to bring about positive change. For many reasons this is the most difficult part of the unit's role. However any successful changes brought about by SEE-u will potentially have far-reaching impact.

Many areas have been identified already by SEE-u that are not providing good service for students, typically because they are not focused on the needs of students, but rather designed for the convenience of staff. Some of these problem areas are within the Faculty, but many relate to central University services.

In particular, the team have made good progress on negotiating the redesign of one key area relating to learning support for disabled students. This is essentially an internal Faculty system, but it needs to interface and smoothly interoperate with a wide range of central services. Due to the shortcomings of the system it replaces, the new system has started to operate already, but final details are still being agreed and refined.

Progress on some wider system reforms has been rather slower than desirable, not least because of the complexity, other agendas and conflicting priorities of those ultimately responsible for the current systems and processes. However as SEE-u gains credibility, it is hoped that the proposals for changes will be taken more seriously.

SEE-u has been fortunate in that there has been a very low turnover of advocates so far. The work of the unit to date has been very varied and the outcomes valued by those requesting support. The team continues to learn and develop. There have been many challenges but also many ideas arising from this pilot year, which will be factored into the plans for the coming year.

Activity Led Learning and the new Faculty building

Developing the Advocacy Service is key to providing high quality customer service that will become the expectation as students and staff move into their new home. The new Faculty building has been extensively researched in order to provide spaces that do not simply replicate the learning spaces that have been suitable for the last forty years, but that will be suitable for the next forty. The building is designed to make visible the entire learning process; classrooms have visual links to the large open and public spaces. The open spaces are being populated with a variety of seating that will allow both focused, semi-private group learning and more social interaction than has been traditional. The technologies that the building employs in its operation are fully made visible and indeed integrated into the learning

process, so that for example the building services students are able to experiment with the real kit that heats the building.

A key element of this is to provide for support services that allow the building to operate and the Faculty has identified three areas that are essential. Firstly there is a need to provide a tutorial assistance service, within the central heart of the building through which one must pass in order to access other areas. This is designed to allow a student to drop-in to resolve questions about any subject that they are having difficulty with; the Faculty has significant experience of providing such a service in Mathematics, holding, jointly with Loughborough University, a national centre for excellence in teaching and learning in Mathematics Education. Secondly, the Faculty must provide timetabled academic and pastoral tutorials in very small groups (five of six people) to allow the student to feel comfortable with the surroundings and the learning experience. And thirdly there needs to be an excellent customer support facility that has published performance standards and resolves the student question in an efficient and timely manner.

All three of these services need to operate in a very public manner and in prominent positions within the building. The customer service model that has been developed for the new building, to be piloted in current buildings from September 2009, is based on experience drawn from high street banking. The specialist services sit behind a front of house staff, who are able to provide the level of service demanded from 90% of customers and then to call on the specialists for the final 10%. It is also clear that this service should be provided directly for the student rather than the traditional response of passing on the problem and the student to the next office.

Alongside the building development is the Faculty's adoption of Activity Led Learning. One of the main strands running through this approach is that some activities are business-facing problems presented to students for a solution. These may be offered on three bases: a consultancy basis if the problem is live and in need to a real solution; a basis of innovation for the problem which already has a commercially expedient solution, but for which the organisation is looking for new solutions; as a purely 'academic' exercise for the organisation offering the problem as part of its engagement with the University.

These activities are designed to allow the student to see their subject in its real life context, both research and commercial, and are designed to lead the learning. This means that the academic learning needs to be both able to provide the coverage necessary and to respond to the problems that the students are solving.

The ALL approach has been piloted during 2008-9 in a number of areas of the Faculty. In mechanical and automotive engineering all first year undergraduates were involved in a six-week ALL project. In other areas discrete modules were delivered using an ALL approach. SEE-u was involved in the evaluation of the pilots, in some cases interviewing staff involved and in other cases surveying students using a variety of methods. At the start of the 2009-10 academic year all first year undergraduate students in the Faculty will be involved in a six week ALL activity, building on the lessons learned from the 2008-9 pilots (Wilson-Medhurst, 2009).

Future plans

In the light of the experience during 2008-9, the roles of Student Advocate and Student Assistant will be merged. The revised advocacy service is evolving to a tiered approach rather like that described in the operation of the new building. This will be piloted from September 2009. The tiers are described in Table 2.

Tier 1	Front of house type operation, where a student presents with an everyday problem or request and the team are able to respond with immediacy and the matter is solved. This requires that the team of advocates is provided with the training necessary at a simple level in each of the functions commonly required.
Tier 2	Rather like the current advocacy service where the student presents with a complex problem that needs detailed investigation. This problem is taken on for the student and the advocate undertakes that investigation alongside the student, ensuring that the student is fully informed about progress, eventually presenting the solution, be it positive or negative. The investigating advocates would also be required to carry out focus groups and survey on behalf of academic staff to allow for more detailed understanding of the student voice.
Tier 3	Advocates associated with academic departments: Each advocate will be assigned to mentor a group of students from their department, starting before the new students arrive at the University. They would also potentially contribute to the department by providing support for academic staff.

Table 2: New tiered roles for Student Advocates

The experience to date of using postgraduate students and final year undergraduates as advocates has been very positive. However research into other universities employing student employments in similar roles suggests that carefully recruited first and second year undergraduates can become equally effective in such roles. As a result the decision has been taken that advocate appointments will be open to all Faculty students, irrespective of stage or level of study. This policy has the added bonus that undergraduate advocates will be available for more than one academic year allowing skills to be further developed, to the benefit of all concerned.

A comprehensive training programme is being developed for the expanded team of advocates to incorporate the skills requirements previously covered by Advocates and Assistants. Advocates will be trained to take on any of the roles described above and may be asked to vary their roles over time. The plan is to make much of the background training material available on-line, supplemented by some face-to-face seminars allowing interaction and team-building. The development of a training package including some on-line materials will help to solve the problem of providing training for ad-hoc new appointees. It will also provide the basis of material towards the aim of allowing accreditation for student advocate activities.

Graduate interns will be appointed to act as team leaders or supervisors for the different teams of advocates. They will oversee the operational rotas and monitor timesheets and payment claims. This approach aims to overcome some of the conflicts arising from selecting one of the advocates to act as team leader. The appointment of graduate interns, normally PhD students available for three years, allows for cost-effective return in investment for the significant amount of training that will be needed.

The SEE-u team will be extended to include at least one member of (permanent) staff from each academic department, plus representation from the Faculty's technical support unit. This will provide a strong link between the SEE-u and all operational areas of the Faculty and should help to extend the "ownership" of the service.

Central or local advocacy service?

The advocacy services observed at US universities that were used as a model for SEE-u were centrally based support units. A question remains about whether a local faculty-based system has advantages over a central support unit.

There are many arguments in favour of a localised service. Firstly, the unit is located in an area where most Faculty students pass often in the course of their normal day-to-day business. Examining the nature of logged queries handled by SEE-u provides further supporting evidence: over 40% of queries related to academic and subject-specific issues, for which a central unit would have difficulty responding to; about 15% of queries related to locating staff for subject advice and reference requests, which were appropriately handled at faculty level; queries about financial problems were resolved by the local supporter advocating and negotiating on behalf of the student with the centrally-based finance service, in full knowledge of the student's circumstances; about 10% of requests, which were generally highly complex in nature, concerned academic and subject support for disabled students, again faculty level knowledge was key to the resolution of most of these problems; of the remaining queries, many arose though deficiencies in Faculty services and systems. The evidence accrued from all cases is being used to justify much needed reforms in the Faculty.

A central advocacy service may have benefits when the need arises to influence central policy, systems and processes. However, it could be argued that a coordinated group of locally-based units like SEE-u would have the potential to create an even greater impact than a single central service when mediating about central issues. Coordinated local advocacy units, customised for serving student needs at faculty level, but drawing on specialist expertise provided centrally provides an effective solution for optimising resources.

Accreditation for work experience

The experience, knowledge and skills gained by the student advocates are very much in keeping with the spirit of Activity Led Learning. Student advocates are often asked to operate in project teams to complete specific tasks and duties. It is important that the activities of SEE-u are viewed as opportunities for learning and further that advocates are rewarded for relevant learning that can be demonstrated, either through the outputs of the unit or by supplementary evidence.

It is clear that as these roles develop that it is essential for the value of experience to be extracted so that the student is able to present their skills development to any future potential employers. The training package and any skills output ought to be integrated into an academic learning experience and this may indeed present as a future strand of activity.

However there is potentially difficulty arising from a situation where a postgraduate student and a first year undergraduate are assigned the same tasks but may demonstrate different levels of skill and expertise when carrying out the associated activities. Such challenges will need to be addressed before the methods for accreditation for such experiences can be agreed.

Conclusions

The Faculty's Student Experience Enhancement Unit has emerged from its first two terms of operation with a clear vision of how it will develop in the longer term to more appropriately serve the future needs of the Faculty.

It is proving difficult at this early stage to provide the evidence for the effectiveness of some of the activities of the unit: the statistics do not really tell the full story. However it is clear to most people in the Faculty know that the unit is serving a new and very useful purpose, not duplicating existing services, but providing bridges and links across the campus to connect the people in need of help to the available expertise.

The ultimate measures of the value added by SEE-u should be an improvement in student retention rates and higher student satisfaction ratings. However there are many conflicting factors that can influence both these metrics that lie beyond the control of the unit.

Many sceptical colleagues were initially concerned about the prospect of giving "students" access to sensitive information, for example about student records and student finances. However although this has proved not to be a problem, there are still some barriers to break down regarding the acceptance of students as colleagues by some staff both in the Faculty and in central University services.

The original vision of the unit included the aim to

directly or indirectly as appropriate, liaise with units and individuals outside the Faculty to promote and influence changes aspiring to excellence for the experience of all types of student inside and outside the Faculty.

It is therefore encouraging to note that the University's Faculty of Art and Design is planning to set up a similar unit, based on SEE-u's experiences of employing student advocates, to be operational from September 2009. The Faculty of Health and Life Sciences has also expressed great interest in this initiative.

The final words of this paper are reserved for the current student advocates themselves. They gain in many ways from the experience of being employed by the Faculty and being part of the SEE-u team. Table 3 contains their contributions to this paper.

Benefits and skills	Comments from SEE-u Student Advocates
Presentation and Communication skills	This has been a great opportunity to communicate with people in the working environment and fellow students that are not from my country.
Team working	Working in a group under this unit has helped me to learn how to communicate with people, listen to people's views and this taught me how to accommodate others irrespective of their views;
Time management and Flexibility	This has helped to manage my time in between my studies, work and other things; The successful key for anyone who wants to be a student advocate is professionalism in time management
Research skills	This has helped me to build my research skills, in the areas of how to set research objectives, conduct a research, analyzing data and writing a report.
Leadership skills	This has greatly helped me in learning some leadership skill e.g. setting time frame for work, motivating others to accomplish a purpose, mediating among people and bringing out the best in people.
Knowledge and understanding	I think the success of the office is tied to how many team members know about and utilize its services; I would like to see our successors knowledgeable with enthusiasm to help other students; We are personally proud of our work and the guidance provided motivated us to work on more diverse issues. This experience has led us to more extensive learning and knowledge of the systems existing here in the university and the students' ability to understand them. Working with experienced staffs here had led us to share their expertise and knowledge which we deploy in various tasks.
Challenge, encouragement	I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of our heads who dedicated their valuable time and energy. They encouraged and challenged us throughout our new work experiment.

Earning money	Being Student Advocate is the post that allows me to gain financial stability and independence
Fitting work around study	This job role is perfectly suited to my constantly changing timetable and I'm able to chose and amend the hours assigned to me on weekly basis
Maturity	Being Student Advocate helped me to integrate more with the University, better utilise its facilities and learn how to behave in corporate environment, while dealing with complex cases that spanned across multiple divisions (e.g. finance, accommodation, International Office)
Employability	Working in multicultural environment helps to prepare me for challenges of future career
Tutors as colleagues	Experience gained in the academic environment gives me some sort of continuity, helping me to reconcile duties of being a student and Student Advocate; People who are my lecturers, tutors and all the University authorities became my colleagues – we share anecdotes, life stories and daily problems
Positive change	I would say working in a SEE-U unit i have come to know that being an advocate is a challenging job. Our unit is working on improving the services for students as well as staff. Also our unit is constantly working improving student experience at all levels from being an applicant to a graduate. So I feel proud of being a team which is working towards a good change

Table 3: Some benefits of being a Student Advocate

References

Glendinning, I., Dunn, I., Butler, C., Hood, H. (2008) *Initiative for Enhancing the Student Experience*, Elate Conference Proceedings, Coventry University.

Sullivan, P (2008) HEFCE's Crystal Ball? Students as scholars, employees, leaders and managers? *In Practice (17)*: Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

Wilson-Medhurst, S, Glendinning, I (2009) *Winning Hearts and Minds: Implementing Activity led Learning*, Conference Paper Laurea University of Applied Technology

Biographical information

Ian Dunn BEng (hons) MSc is Associate Dean for External Relations in the Faculty of Engineering & Computing at Coventry University. His subject background is in engineering design and his research interests are in work-based learning, engineering design education, European partnership building and activity led learning in higher education. He is currently leading the Faculty's developments in preparation for the move to the new Faculty Building in 2011.

Irene Glendinning BSc, FBCS, CEng, CITP is Academic Manager for Student Experience in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University. She has spent the last 19 years in higher education, concerned with programme management, student support and teaching computer science. Earlier in her career she was a computer programmer, systems analyst and also taught mathematics and IT. Her current research interests lie in all aspects of student support, quality assurance and pedagogy in higher education.

(Total word count 5358)